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The USAF Aerospace Expeditionary Force: Flying into the 21st Century

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College of the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

Of

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The DoD-wide drawdown over the last decade has eliminated or relocated two-thirds of forward-based USAF force structure back to the United States. During this time, however, the Air Force has been repeatedly called upon to respond to all levels of crises throughout the world. These sporadic, unpredictable, and demanding crises have taken a toll on Air Force personnel who have been overextended by the challenging OPTEMPO.

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Introduction

“Adherence to dogmas has destroyed more armies and cost more battles than anything in war.”¹

J.F.C. Fuller

The United States Air Force is freeing itself from Cold War dogmas and adopting an *expeditionary* force restructuring to confront a myriad of possible 21st century operations. The term *expeditionary* is derived from the noun *expedition*: “a journey for a specific purpose”, and the adjective *expeditious*: “prompt and speedy.”² Prompt and speedy journeys for specific purposes describes the new operating philosophy of the Air Force as it is called upon repeatedly to respond rapidly to worldwide crises. The large garrisoned force structure of the Cold War Air Force operating from forward-based fixed locations is not structured to fight within an expeditionary construct. The Air Force confronted this mismatch and defines its expeditionary mindset and force structure match as an **Expeditionary Aerospace Force (EAF)**.

From this EAF philosophy, the Air Force is re-creating itself as the **Aerospace Expeditionary Force (AEF)**. The AEF is a unique, task organized, tailororable warfighting force composed of organic airpower assets capable of supporting operations anywhere in the world.³ To foster an appreciation of this new force structure, it is necessary to analyze recent operations history and national requirements driving the AEF reorganization. With this background, this paper will examine AEF organization and employment concepts and define the link between the EAF construct and AEF force

¹ Headquarters Air Force Doctrine Center, Air Force Doctrine Document 1 (AFDD-1), Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 1997, p 73.

² Webster’s Dictionary, Vol no. 198, 1979 edition.

structure. The AEF as designed however, does not completely meet all of the national requirements dictated by the *National Military Strategy* (NMS) and *Joint Vision 2010* (JV2010). Some actions are necessary for the AEF to be fully utilized as one force, ready to cover the full spectrum of conflict. These actions include modification of command and control relationships, integrating airpower forces purposefully excluded from the AEF, and incorporating the AEF into the Major Theater War (MTW) scenario. The Air Force is undertaking a large philosophical shift in its operating strategy and will confront many challenges to the AEF success. These challenges must be overcome because the AEF is a crucial force structure demanded by the unforeseen threats of the 21st century.

Requirements and Analysis

The Air Force must support the wide spectrum of operational conflict outlined in JV2010 and the NMS. These requirements, combined with the current unyielding Operations Tempo (OPTEMPO), prompted the Air Force to reexamine an expeditionary approach to warfighting. Combining past history, the current OPTEMPO and present requirements, the Air Force developed the AEF force structure. The AEF provides the combatant CINCs flexible, rapid response force packages capable of supporting a wide spectrum of operations while reducing the OPTEMPO for personnel involved.

The Air Force believes that the EAF philosophy will better prepare our forces for the conflicts of the 21st century. An expeditionary approach to warfighting is not something new to the Air Force, as its history and roots are rife with expeditionary operations. Prior to the Cold War, the U.S. military regularly operated as an expeditionary force. During WWI and WWII, our military deployed from the

³ Glen W. Goodman, Jr., "An Expeditionary Aerospace Force", *Armed Forces Journal International*, Aug 1998, Vol 136, p17.

Continental United States (CONUS) to engage adversaries abroad – a true expeditionary force. The national strategy changed to *containment* during the Cold War to defeat communist expansion. The Air Force executed this strategy with garrisoned robust forces throughout the world at large bases with extensive infrastructures.⁴ The Air Force no longer had to be expeditionary because its forces were already forward deployed at prepared locations. The Cold War is over, our containment posture has been reduced, and the need to shift back to an expeditionary force has once again become imperative. The NMS strategy of *engagement* has not affected the U.S. Navy and Marines as severely as it has the Air Force because the Navy and Marines were not forward based throughout the world in similar scale to the Air Force to support *containment*. The Navy and Marines have continued to fight with an expeditionary mindset and are successfully supporting *engagement*.

In the last 10 years, overseas assigned Air Force forces have declined 54% as compared to a 29% reduction in overall force structure.⁵ Despite withdrawal of overseas forces to the Continental United States (CONUS), the warfighting CINCs repeatedly demand quick, deployable forces from CONUS to support smaller regional contingencies throughout the world. Because of the unpredictability of these contingencies, rapid response forces are generated “ad hoc” and created from forces readily available. This often results in repeated no-notice deployments for many Active Duty units. These “ad hoc” force packages are able to accomplish the mission, but because of the turbulent and unpredictable nature of these contingencies the Air Force has paid a heavy price in personnel supporting these operations. The result has been an OPTEMPO and personnel

⁴ William Matthews, “Expeditionary forces aim to ease stress”, Air Force Times, 17 Aug 98.

tempo (PERSTEMPO) that has taxed the Air Force's capacity. In turn, this generates rising dissatisfaction among Air Force personnel considering their careers, and their subsequent departure from the military. The challenging PERSTEMPO problem in the pilot career field alone causes a dramatic increase in pilots separating from service, and the Air Force predicts a shortage of 2,000 pilots by the year 2002.⁶ One possible alleviation of the PERSTEMPO problem is predictable employment through the AEF restructure.

Acting Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters said in regards to the AEF, "We hope to reduce the number one complaint we hear from our forces: We are deploying them too often on too little notice, and we are working them too hard when they are at home filling in for others who have deployed."⁷ Reduction of PERSTEMPO is essential to stabilize the Air Force's current force structure and prevent the exodus of many airmen exhausted from the current pace of operations. Lt Gen Lawrence P. Farrell Jr., the architect of the EAF stated that, "It's [the AEF] an attempt to solve the OPTEMPO problem."⁸ Workload has increased while the Air Force has decreased its overseas basing by two-thirds and has seen a total force-strength reduction of 36% from active duty and 30% from Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard manpower.⁹ The Air Force recognizes its high OPTEMPO and predicts the AEF will reduce the demand on personnel and help retention.¹⁰

The focus of the AEF design was to ensure it supports our NMS and at the same time possesses the flexibility to meet the requirements of JV2010. JV2010 directs each

⁵ Naval War College "U.S. Air Force Capabilities Brief", Dec 1998, Slide 25.

⁶ Carl Nicholson, HQ AFPC/DPAOM1, Interview with author, 15 Dec 98.

⁷ Matthews, 6.

⁸ Bruce D. Callender, "The New Expeditionary Force", Air Force Magazine, Sep 1998, p 56.

service to work together to achieve “Full Spectrum Dominance” over the full range of military operations.¹¹ JV2010 further states that in order to achieve full spectrum dominance, “power projection, enabled by overseas presence, will likely remain the fundamental strategic concept of our future force.”¹² Within these guidelines, the Air Force offers a force structure that exploits the unique “Global Engagement” capability that its dominant aerospace force brings to the fight. The Global Engagement philosophy cannot be effectively accomplished with current force structure because it is still organized to fight a MTW, and is not flexible enough to efficiently support numerous smaller contingencies and relief operations. Smaller scale operations require tailored force packages capable of meeting objectives that change from mission to mission. There are no standing force packages specifically built to handle these varying missions. Forces used are constructed “ad hoc” from available resources, creating unpredictable and demanding deployment schedules. The AEF will add predictability to deployments in addition to providing a tailored force capable of meeting the power projection criteria of JV2010.

The AEF is also designed to meet the construct of the 1997 NMS. The NMS requires military forces to *Shape* the international environment, *Respond* to the full spectrum of crises, and *Prepare now* for an uncertain future. The AEF is designed to meet all three of these requirements.¹³

The AEF can shape the international environment by projecting a strong military presence and being able to respond to any crisis in the world within 48 -72 hours. The

⁹ Goodman, p18.

¹⁰ Barry B. Coble, USAF/XOPE, Interview with author, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 21 Jan 99.

¹¹ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Vision 2010, (no date), p 2.

¹² Ibid, p 4.

mere fact that the U.S. has this capability tells hostile actors to reconsider inappropriate actions because the U.S. has the capability to respond militarily if warranted.

The AEF is modeled to reshape the garrison styled “Cold War Air Force” into a force capable of responding to uncertain crises. It currently does not have the capability to meet the NMS-defined “Full Spectrum of Crises” and the AEF concept is to be abandoned if a MTW were to occur. As the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Michael Ryan put it during an interview in Citizen Airman, “..all bets are off if the big war comes.”¹⁴

The third requirement to prepare now for an uncertain future is the most difficult task facing the Air Force. It is an impossible task to define or construct a “perfect” military machine or force capable of responding to everything and anything. However, preparing for an uncertain future is the mission of the AEF. The AEF is capable of preparing for future conflicts because its forces will train together as part of a permanent force package, developing synergy throughout its lifecycle. A well-trained AEF is more diversely capable and offers a higher degree of preparedness to support uncertain tasks faced by the combatant CINCs.

The AEF

For the next five years, the Air Force and DOD foresee involvement in operations and contingencies very similar to those we have engaged in over the past five years.¹⁵

¹³ Barry B. Coble, USAF/XOPE, “Expeditionary Aerospace Force”, Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 21 Jan 99

¹⁴ (No Author), “The Expeditionary Aerospace Force, What does the new Air Force structure mean for the Reserve?”, Citizen Airman, October 1998, p 2.

¹⁵ Coble, Lecture.

Now instead of forming an “ad hoc” force to handle on ongoing or pop-up crisis, the Air Force envisions the AEF as an aerospace force structured to:¹⁶

1. Provide the NCA a formidable sized force package capable of engaging a threat within 48 – 72 hours of notification.
2. Provide a regional CINC a force tailored to a specific threat or region.
3. Provide stability and predictability to Active Duty personnel.
4. Provide “hard” schedules for Guard and Reserve units enabling them to participate in more deployments, thus relieving the deployment pressure on Active Duty personnel.

The AEF is a force composed of existing USAF assets that bring lethality and mobility together as a weapon capable of engaging adversaries anywhere in the world.¹⁷

The original *Air* Expeditionary Force model developed by Air Combat Command in the Fall of 1995 was composed of only 30 combat aircraft and 1200 personnel.¹⁸ This force was meant for worldwide response while limiting personnel deployment days to fewer than 120 days per year.¹⁹ The new *Aerospace* Expeditionary Force has built upon the original model and greatly expanded the AEF’s capability.

The AEF is now structured to include not only combat aircraft, but nearly every airman, aircraft and capability within the Air Force. Plans are to form ten AEFs and two “on-call” Air Expeditionary Wings (AEW) that will be agile enough to respond to the entire spectrum of war, excluding specific employment in MTWs (Figure 1).²⁰ The AEF force structure will keep the Air Force focused on 21st century threats by enabling deliberate planning, predictable deployments, and expedient power projection from the Continental United States (CONUS) with on-call forces.

¹⁶ Coble, Interview.

¹⁷ Coble, Lecture.

¹⁸ Richard G. Davis, Immediate Reach, Immediate Power: The Air Expeditionary Force and American Power Projection in the Post Cold War Era, Air Force History and Museums Program, 1998, p 22.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 7.

²⁰ Coble, Lecture. The “on call” wings represent current composite wings at Mountain Home AFB and Seymour-Johnson AFB.

The AEF commander will be the Wing Commander of one of ten designated Lead Wings for each AEF. These Lead Wings will act as the main coordinating agency and command element for each AEF. The Lead Wings will also have robust support capabilities that will permit deployment of a large amount of their base support forces, such as Security Forces personnel, without increasing the workload for those personnel left behind.²¹ AEF staff will predominantly come from the Lead Wing but will be supported by other AEF units.²²

The AEF is a composite force of approximately 125 – 150 various aircraft and approximately 10,000 personnel in each of the ten AEFs. Not all of these aircraft and personnel will be deployed simultaneously. The combatant CINC and his Air Component Commander (ACC) will have the flexibility to request those AEF forces they deem necessary to meet the needs of a specific tasking - a “tailored” force package. A notional AEF is depicted at Figure 2. Each AEF will be similar in force structure so that they will be of approximately equal in strength and capability.

Each one of the AEFs will have a 90-day deployment window or “on-call” status once within a 15-month cycle (Figure 3).²³ A 15-month cycle projects two AEFs deployed or on call at any given time for 90 days. A brief standdown period occurs after their (maximum) 90-day deployment. The AEF then has approximately 9 - 11 months to conduct training including combined force Flag exercises (Red Flag, Maple Flag, etc.). The Flag exercises will allow AEF forces to train together before they fight together, a concept currently unheard of because it is rare that two squadrons of different capabilities know they will be deploying together to the same Area of Responsibility (AOR). The 1 -

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

3 months prior to their next 90-day deployment window is spent on specific pre-deployment preparation and AOR training. This operating concept will benefit the regional CINC because he is provided an airpower “package” that knows the mission, has conducted prior coordination and training, and has studied the threat. The individual deploying units also benefit because they are focused on a specific region, a specific threat, and a specific mission.

In existing Air Force structure, individual units know of existing deployments 1 – 3 months ahead of time, but they very rarely coordinate prior to deployment. They are organizationally tasked and trained to their employment capabilities (fighter, tanker, airlift, etc.). This has long been the norm and is a barrier to integrating forces. Under the AEF concept, the deploying force package will be predetermined, allowing individual units to work together across parochial barriers and better coordinate power projection for the force package.

The AEF schedule is designed to add predictability to the lives of personnel. Increased predictability of deployments will permit a greater use of the Air Reserve Component (ARC), comprised of the Air Force Reserve (AFRES) and Air National Guard (ANG). ARC participation is key to the success of the AEF concept. The unpredictable nature of today’s crises makes it very difficult for ARC units to support the short-notice deployments because of conflict with their civilian employers.²⁴ Under the AEF structure, ARC deployments will be scheduled at least 12 months in advance, allowing more reservists and guardsmen to de-conflict with their employers and participate in AEF deployments.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ (no author), Citizen Airman, p 3.

How the AFRES and ANG rotate their forces to support their AEF taskings will be left up to them. An ARC unit (or units) would deploy with their equipment and aircraft as a part of the AEF for the full 90-day deployment window. With their assets in place, they could rotate personnel for their required two weeks of active duty service. Currently, most AFRES and ANG personnel spend the two weeks of active duty time at the home unit, drilling and training. Now these two weeks can be spent actually participating in real world missions and actively supporting the NMS. AFRES and ANG units will be among the first units to deploy with the active duty “lead wing” ensuring productive use during their 90-day deployment window. The rest of the force needed to round out the AEF will then be drawn from other active duty bases as needed.²⁵

Challenges & Solutions

The AEF model is not a perfect force structure. It has limitations that require further analysis, and it will undoubtedly uncover more challenges as the first AEF packages are employed. The present limitations of the AEF concern the spectrum of conflict it can support, the new command and control relationships required between the AEF commander and Numbered Air Force, and the full integration of all Air Force assets into the AEF concept. These challenges have solutions.

Needs of the warfighting CINC range from peacetime training exercises to full-scale Major Theater War. Within this context, the AEF is designed to provide airpower to the warfighting CINC, enabling him to handle the full spectrum of MOOTW and small-scale contingencies up to the size of our current posture in the Persian Gulf. The AEF concept does not provide airpower to handle MTW. The Air Force has conceded that it will rely on its present OPLANs to fulfill this mission. Because the AEF is not

²⁵ Coble, Interview.

currently designed to handle MTWs, the Air Force is essentially left with a very broad mission dictated by the NMS and two force structures to fulfill that mission (Figure 4). The two force structures are not seamlessly linked to provide an easy transition from one force structure to the other.

Details on how the AEF would transition to MTW will be addressed at this month's Air Force "four star" general officer conference.²⁶ The Air Force must fulfill all the requirements of the NMS. Details on how the AEF transitions to an OPLAN must be finalized if the AEF force structure is to project a viable warfighting capability. It will be a daunting task to integrate the AEF into our OPLANs, but, once done, the Air Force will possess a fighting force structure unrivaled in flexibility and capability. If this integration cannot be done, the Air Force will have to decide if it can successfully execute two competing force structures from a limited set of resources. The Air Force must aggressively study the AEF integration into the OPLANs and adopt the AEF as its single force structure.

Air Force doctrine detailing command and control of the Aerospace Expeditionary Force concept has yet to be written, although the framework can be found in Air Force Doctrine Document 1 (AFDD-1) and Air Force Doctrine Document 2 (AFDD-2). Basic doctrine details Air Force command structure through the Major Command (MAJCOM) and Numbered Air Force (NAF). The MAJCOM is a subdivision of the Air Force organized on a functional or area basis. The MAJCOM, via its NAFs, is responsible for administrative control (ADCON) of its forces and acts as a force provider to the combatant CINCs.²⁷ ADCON is the service's "organize, train and equip"

²⁶ Coble, Interview.

²⁷ AFDD-1, p 62.

authority. In addition to its subordinate ADCON authority, the NAF is also the senior war-fighting echelon of the U.S. Air Force.²⁸ The AEF commander will be a Brigadier General (O-7) responsible for training and readiness when the force is at home and for commanding the force on deployment. Supervising the AEF commander is a NAF commander who will then report to the MAJCOM.²⁹

AFDD-2 states the AEF is a "generic" term used to describe the deployed wings, groups, or squadrons attached to an in-place NAF commander supporting the regional CINC³⁰. A modification to doctrine is needed because an AEF is no longer a deployed "generic" force. An AEF is now a permanent, peacetime organized force with a permanently assigned commander. A conflict develops in existing command and control authority because the AEF commander is responsible for preparing his forces for deployment, but the organize, train and equip responsibility (ADCON) is already established under the NAF. The roles and responsibility of the AEF commander and NAF commander appear to conflict with each other. Further study will be required to ensure that duplication of command relationships do not exist.

Another challenge facing the AEF is the exclusion of strategic airlift assets and special mission aircraft. Strategic airlift assets will continue to maintain current employment procedures and will not be assigned to the AEFs. Special mission aircraft (E-8 Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS), E-3 Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS), etc) have been defined as High-Demand, Low-Density (HDLD) "force enablers" that "...(W)ill not be assigned to AEF's, but... could

²⁸ Headquarters Air Force Doctrine Center, Air Force Doctrine Document 2 (AFDD-2), Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 1998, p 32.

²⁹ Jennifer Palmer, "Details on new AEF structure put on hold", Air ForceTimes, 28 Dec 1998, p 10.

³⁰ AFDD-2, p 35.

continue to be tapped for every deployment anyway.”³¹ Integration of airlift and HDLD assets is of vital importance if the AEF concept is to be completely embraced by the Air Force. If they are not, the Air Force will likely continue to deploy these assets and people at an extremely high OPTEMPO, continue to see these personnel separate from the Air Force, isolate these forces from the mainstream force structure, and never fully realize the full potential of the AEF concept.

Each AEF will have a similar airlift requirement and the Air Force can incorporate its strategic airlift assets by assigning strategic airlift squadron(s) to each AEF. As the CINC “tailors” the AEF to meet his needs, strategic airlift can be tailored as well to meet the anticipated lift requirements. Assigning strategic airlift to the AEF will enable those squadrons to predict their deployment and training schedules. An argument can be made that assigning strategic airlift to a specific AEF commits national airlift assets that have an ongoing strategic mission. The opposite is true. Assigning strategic airlift to the AEF would enable more effective deliberate planning of our nation's mobility requirements.

The same logic applies to assigning HDLD assets to individual AEFs. These forces will be tasked more than the typical fighter and bomber squadrons assigned to an AEF, but that does not discount the benefits that deliberate planning and force allocation will bring to these HDLD assets. Higher tasking statistics may be the means to explain to lawmakers that the Air Force does not have enough of these assets to meet current requirements. Indeed, strategic airlift and HDLD assets may have to be assigned among multiple AEF's because of their limited numbers, but their assignment nonetheless will provide them a predictable schedule and stability.

³¹ Jennifer Palmer, “Still learning as expedition force develops”, Air Force Times, 4 Jan 1999, p 13.

Conclusion

Since 1990, over 75 incidents around the world have triggered a U.S. military response.³² The Air Force must learn to fight in an expeditionary manner now that the Global Engagement requirements must be met with forces predominately based in the CONUS. The tool to effectively employ these forces and meet this requirement is the AEF.

The AEF structure provides the warfighting CINC or CJTF a flexible, tailorable, on call force ready to support a myriad of missions across the full spectrum of conflict with the potential of handling an MTW scenario. Creation of this force also provides a predictable, stable schedule to the men and women serving in the Air Force. Additionally, the AEF provides a framework for future force structure because it is designed to comply with the guidance of JV2010.

AEF force structuring will provide the Air Force Chief of Staff (CSAF) a metric to quantify his service's workload.³³ The Air Force has defined its employment capabilities with ten AEFs, each with a specific timetable for employment much like the Navy's Carrier Battle Group (CVBG) force package. The Navy has a limited number of CVBGs, and the Chief of Naval Operations can measure the Navy's OPTEMPO based on the number and frequency of CVBG deployments. CSAF now has a similar metric to measure Air Force OPTEMPO based on the number and frequency of AEF deployments. CSAF will also now be able to determine the effect on future operations if his requirements were to exceed the two AEFs on-call plus the on-call AEW.

³² Naval War College "U.S. Air Force Capabilities Brief", Dec 1998, Slide 25.

³³ Coble, Interview.

The AEF concept must be integrated into the entire spectrum of conflict to include MTW's. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Henry H. Shelton gives clear direction in the force structure the military must maintain: "...(T)he United States must avoid the temptation of patterning its forces for the challenge of non-traditional missions while ignoring their central purpose: fighting and winning the major conflicts which pose the most serious threats to the United States and its national interest."³⁴ In order to meet CJCS requirements, the USAF has the dichotomy of the AEF model to support "non-traditional" missions and a current force structure to support major conflicts (MTW). The AEF must eventually become the single force structure the USAF trains with, fights with, and wins with. Maintaining two separate force structures to meet the full spectrum of conflict produces dissimilar employment options and will dilute the responsiveness of airpower to support the needs of the warfighting CINC.

³⁴ Henry H. Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "From the Chairman, The US military and Foreign Policy", Harvard International Review, Vol. XX, No. 1, Winter 1997/1998, p 78.

A E F R o t a t i o n a l C y c l e

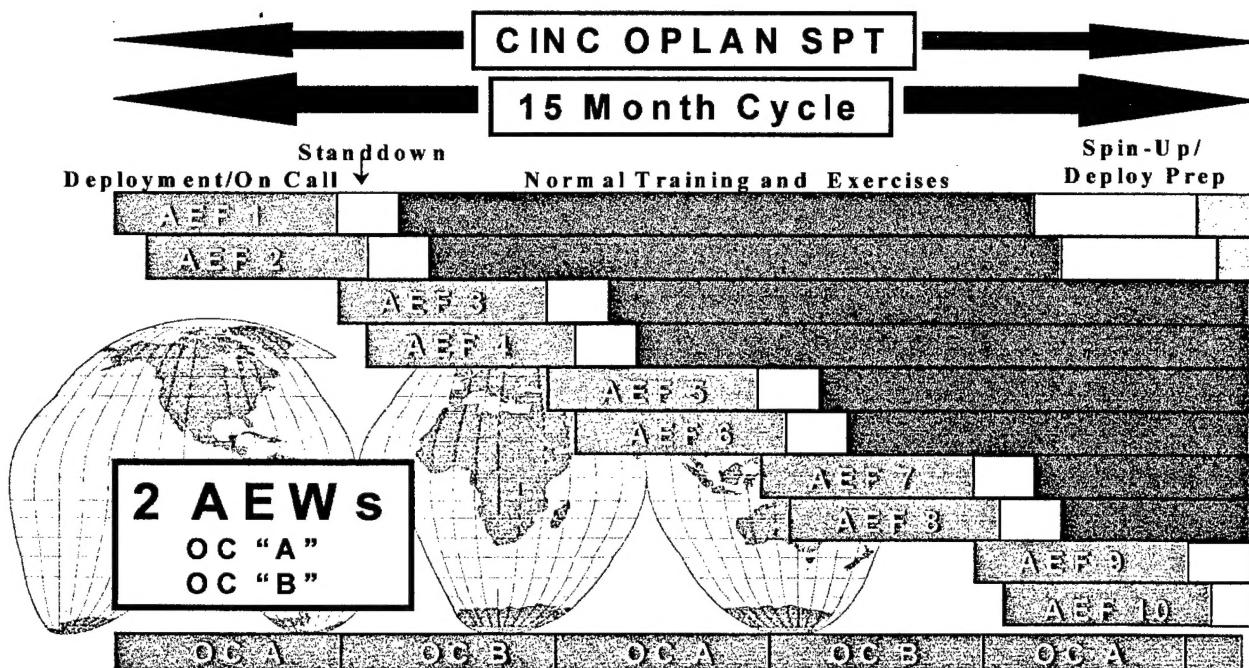


Figure 1. AEF/AEW Rotation Cycle

	Forward Deployed	On Call At Home
Fighter		
F-15	24	45-80
F-16	12	Fighter Aircraft
F-16 (SEAD)	8	of varying capabilities
A-10	6	
Bombers		
B-1, B-2, B-52		15-30
Special Mission Acft		
JSTARS, AWACS, U2	As Required	40-90
CSAR, EC-130 EW	As Required	Cargo, Tanker
		and Special
		Mission Acft
Transport		
KC-135/KC-10 tankers	24	
C-130	12	
Personnel	3,400 - 4,400 combat 2,600 support As Req'd civilian contractors	As Required

Figure 2. Notional AEF Force Structure

Life Cycle of an AEF (notional)

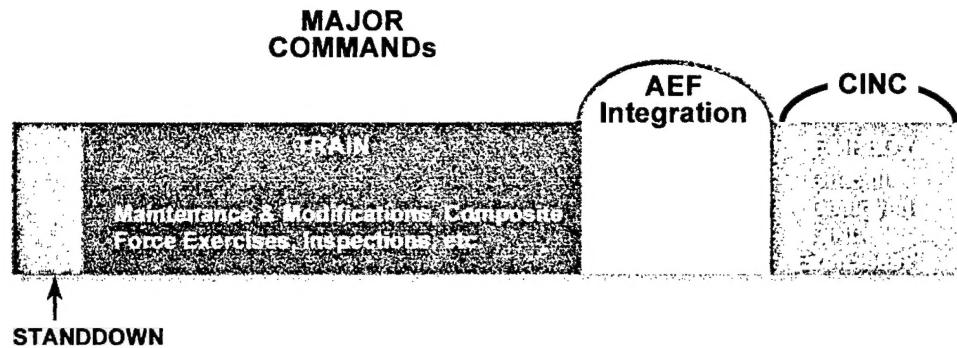


Figure 3. Notional Life Cycle of an AEF

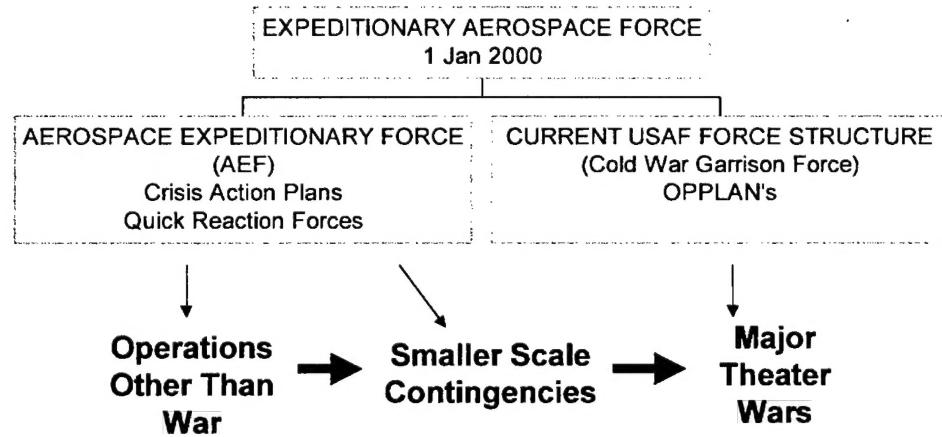


Figure 4. Air Force Structure and Conflict Scale

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*Note: Figures 1 and 4 are extracted from this lecture.

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